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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Thursday, April 5*

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- Israel Frees Some Asylum Seekers after Deportation Axed
- Arab League Wants ICC to Probe IDF Shootings of Protesters
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- Palestinians Seek to Sell a 45% Stake in a Gas Field Off Gaza
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# News Excerpts

April 5, 2018

Associated Press

## **Israeli Airstrike on Gaza Border Kills Palestinian**

An Israeli airstrike in northern Gaza early on Thursday killed a Palestinian, while a second man died from wounds sustained in last week's mass protest along the Gaza-Israel border, officials said. The military said an aircraft had targeted an "armed terrorist adjacent to the security fence" in northern Gaza early in the morning. The fatalities bring to 21 the number of people killed in confrontations in the volatile area over the past week. A new round of protests along the border is expected on Friday, raising the prospect of further bloodshed.

Times of Israel

## **Israel Frees Some Asylum Seekers after Deportation Axed**

The Israeli government announced on Wednesday that it released 58 African asylum seekers held in a detention facility in southern Israel after a controversial plan to deport the migrants to Rwanda fell apart. The state decision was announced in a response to a High Court petition filed on behalf of a slew of human rights organizations who argued the continued imprisonment of the asylum seekers was illegal. The remaining 212 asylum seekers held in Saharonim Prison will remain in detention for now as the state is still in talks with an unnamed country — widely believed to be Uganda — to forcibly deport them there.

Times of Israel

## **Arab League Wants ICC to Probe IDF Shootings**

The head of the Arab League said Wednesday that his organization wants the International Criminal Court in The Hague to investigate the deaths last week of 18 Palestinians during protests near Gaza's border with Israel. During an official visit to Lisbon, Portugal Ahmed Aboul Gheit said that the Arab League also supports UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's call for an independent investigation of the fatal shootings by Israeli forces. Aboul Gheit asserted that Palestinians were demanding their rights "and they will not be forgotten or diminished."

Ha'aretz

## **B'Tselem to IDF: Refuse to Fire at Unarmed Protesters**

The Israeli anti-occupation and human rights group B'Tselem called for Israeli troops Wednesday to refuse orders to shoot unarmed Palestinian protesters near the Gaza border fence, following the killing of several demonstrators over the past week. "If soldiers on the ground receive orders to fire live ammunition at unarmed civilians, they are duty-bound to refuse to obey them," it said in a statement. On Tuesday, a 25-year-old Palestinian was shot and killed in the central Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

Ha'aretz

## **Palestinians Seek to Sell a 45% Stake in a Gas Field Off Gaza**

The Palestinians are seeking to sell a 45% stake in a gas field off Gaza to help to develop the project, its main stakeholder, the Palestine Investment Fund, said on Wednesday after Royal Dutch Shell announced it had pulled out. The Gaza Marine project, about 20 miles off the Gaza coast, has long been seen as an opportunity for the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority to join the Mediterranean gas bonanza, providing a major source of income to reduce its reliance on foreign aid. But Palestinian political disputes and conflict with Israel, as well as economic factors, have delayed plans to develop the field, and Shell had struggled to find a buyer for its 55% stake in the field.

Associated Press

## **Mossad Chief '100 Percent Certain' Iran Seeks Nuclear Bomb**

The head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency is "100 percent certain" that Iran remains committed to developing a nuclear bomb and believes the international community must change or scrap its nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic. Yossi Cohen has been holding discussions about the Iranian nuclear program and delivered his assessment in a recent closed meeting with senior officials. Cohen also criticized the decision to lift sanctions on Iran, saying it has resulted in "significantly increased" aggression by Iran, and noted Iran's continued development of long-range ballistic missiles.

Times of Israel

## **Terror Groups Seethe Over Saudi Crown Prince's Comments**

Palestinian terror groups on Wednesday accused Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of paving the way for "normalization" between the Arab countries and Israel. Salman, in an interview published Monday, recognized Israel's right to exist and extolled the prospect of future diplomatic relations between his kingdom and the Jewish state. Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzouk said in a tweet: "All those who are addressing the Americans and Zionists with ambiguous words and are talking about concessions in order to appease them are living under an illusion." The PA chose to ignore Salman's remarks in an apparent attempt to avoid triggering a crisis between Ramallah and Riyadh.

Ha'aretz

## **Palestinians Host Jews in First West Bank 'Freedom Seder'**

In a first-of-its kind event, Palestinian activists in Hebron played host to 100 Israelis and international visitors on Wednesday evening in what was billed as a "Freedom Seder." The Passover celebration featured texts in English, Hebrew and Arabic that interwove the traditional Jewish tale of liberation from Egypt with messages opposing the occupation. Youth Against Settlements spokesman Izzat Karake said it was exciting to experience a Passover seder, explaining that for Hebron and other West Bank residents, Jewish holidays were dreaded as times when already oppressive security measures tighten further and their movements are restricted even more.

## Some Uncomfortable Gaza Truths

By Michael Koplow, Policy Director, Israel Policy Forum

- That the sequence of events that unfolded on the Gaza border last Friday was entirely predictable, and that the reaction to those events was even more so, does not make the aftermath any more palatable. The “March of Return” that began last week and is scheduled to resume each Friday for the next six weeks, ultimately culminating in a May 15 Nakba Day effort to storm the border fence, has been in the works for months. Israel had plenty of time to prepare for it, as it watched tent encampments and paved pavilions get built on the Gaza side. The march’s organizers, which did not include Hamas at the start but certainly did by the end, also had time to prepare as they absorbed the warnings issued by Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and IDF officials and watched Israeli sharpshooters settle in on the Israeli side of the border. What unfolded followed a familiar pattern; Hamas embedded amongst larger number of civilians, did its best to provoke an Israeli response to its own violent tactics, Israel was unable to restrain itself and ended up killing and injuring a larger number of Palestinians than is feasible to explain or justify, and the battle to spin the result is now hotter than the actual battle itself.
- Clashes between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza are for me one of the most difficult aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Positions that are already hardened become even more so in the red hot Gaza forge, as you have Israel facing off against an actual terrorist group while casualty numbers – including civilian ones – mount terrifyingly fast and in a one-sided fashion on the Palestinian side. While black and white tend not to be useful colors when thinking about conflict in the Holy Land, they dominate nearly every corner of the Israel-Palestine space whenever fighting erupts in Gaza. Rather than try to repaint the overall picture with some gray, it may be useful for each side to get some of the other side’s black and white in the hopes of avoiding the same predictable fault lines this Friday and every Friday for a month and a half.
- To my friends and colleagues on the left: What happened on Friday was not a peaceful protest. The August 1963 March on Washington did not have galabaya-clad men throwing Molotov cocktails. Gandhi’s salt march did not feature burning tires and bullets across a border fence. If the five percent of violent actors abuse the ninety five percent of peaceful ones to wreak havoc, you cannot just pretend that the five percent do not exist and repeatedly state that Friday’s protest was a non-violent one. There were many peaceful protesters, and then a non-trivial group of ones who were there for nefarious purposes and nothing more. If the ones who truly want to engage in a mass act of protest and send a message to Israel and the wider world are unwilling to rein in the troublemakers in their midst, then they lose the moral high ground that they want to occupy but are unwilling to insist upon.
- There is a border fence between Israel and Gaza. Unlike the security barrier in the West Bank, the route of which does not stick to the 1949 Armistice Green Line, the Gaza barrier is built precisely upon the line agreed upon by both sides in the Oslo II agreement in 1995. Israel has

withdrawn all of its soldiers and citizens from Gaza and does not claim the territory for itself. Attempts to tear down the fence or cross it to get into Israel illegally are not legitimate forms of protest, but criminal acts. Every country in the world has the right to police its own borders, and the vast majority of them do just that. Israel's rules of engagement dictated firing at anyone who tried to cross the barrier or damage it, and in the context of borders around the world, that is both understandable and legitimate.

- The majority of those killed on Friday were not good guys, freedom fighters, or human rights activists. They were known terrorists, identified by Israel and proudly claimed by Hamas itself. No deaths should ever be celebrated and that includes these ones, but let's be clear about who these people were and what their aim was. Young men carrying AK-47s and grenades, shooting as they rush the fence, are not sympathetic figures and they deserve nobody's sympathy. Israel makes plenty of mistakes and does plenty of things wrong – and if you haven't smashed your screen in anger yet, I'm about to detail that too – but killing terrorists in the midst of violent acts is not one of them.
- To my friends and colleagues on the right: Israel is not an innocent blameless actor, thrust into the furor surrounding it through no fault of its own. Set aside the Hamas fighters killed on Friday; Israel still wounded hundreds more. Just consider the odds of every single one of those people being a terrorist or someone affiliated with a terrorist group in the context of a gathering of twenty to thirty thousand people, and you'll realize immediately that there is zero chance that Israel did not shoot and harm completely unarmed and innocent people. The fact that this is a lark compared to what goes on, say, in Syria does not make it beyond reproach. It also doesn't matter that Hamas put Israel in the untenable situation in which it found itself, since this does not absolve the IDF from acting with the utmost care not to kill or even harm civilians who are in the way. Israel had a barrier and trenches between it and anyone trying to breach the fence, and an array of snipers waiting for anyone who managed the feat. News reports indicate that most of those injured were not at the fence or in the no-go zone leading up to the fence. Hundreds of injuries not only looks terrible, it is terrible.
- The IDF is not the most moral army in the world, because there is no most moral army in the world. I know this because the words "moral" and "army" are generally at odds, and there is no reason to think that the IDF is an exception to this rule that has lasted through centuries of time and space. Soldiers' jobs are to kill other people, and when you are shooting at someone who is trying to kill you, human nature dictates that morality and ethics are not going to be at the forefront of your mind. Crimes happen in war, and that Israeli soldiers do things that they aren't supposed to does not make them worse than anyone else. It makes them exactly like everyone else. Repeating a completely indefensible and evidence-free platitude like a broken record not only harms your general credibility, it makes Israel's foes work extra hard to demonstrate that your position is nonsensical and rub it in your face. It also creates an impossibly high standard that can never actually be met, setting Israeli soldiers up for certain failure. The "most moral army in the world" talking point is both substantively and tactically foolish, it convinces nobody,

and every time it is repeated it does more than anything else to shift the conversation on to Israel's sins rather than its opponents' ones.

- The fact that there are no Israelis in Gaza does not mean that Israel has no responsibility for what goes on there. Israel controls Gaza's airspace, enforces a blockade of it from the sea, and controls the border on two of the three remaining sides. It controls what goes into Gaza and what comes out of Gaza, both people and goods. Only someone who is willfully blind or purposely obtuse would deign to argue that Gaza is an independent territory free of Israeli control. Israel has contributed to a staggeringly awful humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and Israel's political leadership has used Hamas's presence there to punish nearly two million people while avoiding having to make any hard decisions. You can talk all you want about rockets, but Hamas has not fired a rocket in fourteen months, and yet Israel has conceded nothing while every day the chances of an explosion increase. There is a reason that a majority of the cabinet in the most right-wing government in Israel's history, along with near unanimity among the IDF leadership, support building Gaza a seaport and airport and ending its isolation from the rest of the world, yet Prime Minister Netanyahu sits on his hands. If you were a Palestinian stuck in Gaza, with barely any potable water, sewage in the streets, electricity for four hours a day at best, and literally nowhere to go because Israel – and yes, Egypt too – won't let you out, you'd be pretty despondent too. You may even do anything you could to get out, including trying to get past the border fence. If you think this Friday was bad, each subsequent one is going to be worse and worse, and if tens of thousands of Palestinians indeed rush the fence and try to obliterate it on May 15, it really will represent Israel's biggest crisis since the Yom Kippur War. All of this could have been avoided with some policy changes toward Gaza that may now be too late, and it's not like the Israeli government didn't have plenty of voices in its ear warning about just this scenario for months, if not years.
- I don't expect anyone to read this and fundamentally change their minds about the balance of what happened on Friday. I don't claim any superior wisdom or moral authority on any of this. The only thing I am begging to get across is that none of this is as straightforward as it appears to those who are passionate about these issues, and if we at least take a small step in acknowledging that, perhaps it can lead to solutions rather than loud and drawn out arguments. If there is one thing that I know, it is that solutions to the Gaza problem are desperately needed, since neither Israel nor the Palestinians benefit in any way from iterated and increasingly ramped up versions of what took place last week.

## **May Is Likely to Be an Ugly Month in Gaza**

By Hussein Ibish, Senior Resident, Arab Gulf States Institute

- The violence last Friday in Gaza, in which 18 Palestinian protesters were killed by Israeli troops near the border, was the worst since the war of 2014. But everything is in place for a significant escalation in coming weeks, particularly in mid-May. A series of major tripwires are clustered tightly together: commemorations of the 70th anniversary of Israel's founding on May 14-15; mourning by Palestinians who regard the same event as their "catastrophe" and observe May 15 as "Nakba Day"; and the scheduled opening of a U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem on May 14, courtesy of the administration of President Donald Trump. Things are likely to get worse because Palestinians increasingly feel they have nothing left to lose. The "March of Return" last week drew unprecedented crowds of up to 30,000 Palestinians from all parts of Gaza society. In a festive and surreal atmosphere, vendors sold ice cream to picnicking families as young men risked their lives by approaching the border.
- Over 90 percent of Gaza's almost 2 million people are refugees from what is now southern Israel. Unlike most other Palestinians, they are still geographically close to the towns and villages from which they were displaced in 1947-48. Since its founding, Israel has had one primary response to Palestinians, armed or not, attempting to go home without permission. The Israeli military reiterated that anyone approaching within 300 meters of the border would face a shoot-to-kill policy. But things are so bad in the wretched open-air prison of Gaza that the only surprise is that the death toll wasn't even higher. One of the most densely populated places on earth, Gaza is now barely habitable. Hunger is rampant. Water is undrinkable. Unemployment is close to 50 percent. Health-care is scanty at best. Electricity is available just two to four hours per day. The once-beautiful seacoast is now a giant sewer. And there's virtually no way in or out of the territory which, since a violent takeover in 2007 by the Islamist faction Hamas, has been under a lockdown by Israel and Egypt.
- For more than 10 years, the people of Gaza have been subjected to the misrule of Hamas, the heavily armed Muslim Brotherhood faction that exploits and intensifies their misery. Last summer, Hamas attempted to use a fictional "reconciliation" agreement with its Fatah rivals, who control the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, to get out of this stranglehold. Hamas sought to get the Palestinian Authority to take up the burden of administration in Gaza, secure badly needed aid and reconstruction money, and, most importantly, win themselves a new foothold in the West Bank, where they have been frozen out since the Palestinian factions split in 2007. But Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made reconciliation contingent on Hamas disarming, which the militant group won't consider. Hamas was left virtually without options.
- Abbas, too, is badly adrift. He staked his entire career on negotiations with Israel, brokered by the U.S. But that "peace process" has been frozen since the first term of President Barack Obama, and Israel is moving closer to annexing large chunks of the West Bank. Virtually no

Palestinians believe anymore that Israel will ever agree to end the occupation and allow them to create their own state. The Trump administration has reinforced this conviction by abandoning Washington's long-standing commitment to a two-state outcome, and has recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Abbas's diplomatic strategy therefore now looks like the ultimate fiasco. The last straw for Abbas came in March, when Hamas tried to assassinate his prime minister, Rami Hamdallah.

- Enraged, Abbas has lashed out at all his antagonists in a recent series of unhinged speeches. He bitterly denounced Israel and castigated the Trump administration, describing its peace efforts as “the slap of the century” and calling the U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, a “son of a dog.” He excoriated Hamas followers as terrorist “thugs and hooligans,” and said the only reason their operatives weren't being killed all over the world in revenge is that he won't sink to their murderous level. Abbas announced a new series of harsh sanctions against Hamas and Gaza, and has been prodding Hamas and Israel toward another conflict, hoping to be the prime beneficiary as his two adversaries scorch each other while Washington scrambles to douse the flames.
- With Hamas's militancy and Abbas's diplomacy both thoroughly discredited, Palestinian civilians are desperate for a new political dynamic. The recent “March of Return” protests originally promised that, but Hamas has thus far managed to hijack them. Yet if the protest movement leads to another war with Israel, the result could prove catastrophic for Hamas's political viability. And if widespread unrest spreads to the West Bank, that could fatally undermine the Palestinian Authority. Both Palestinian Islamists and nationalists are out of options, out of ideas, and out of luck. The Palestinian public is out of patience and nearly out of hope. That's a combustible formula. A series of demonstrations in the coming weeks has already been scheduled in Gaza, beginning next Friday. But the mid-May commemorations, set against this backdrop of frustration and despair, look incredibly dangerous. When an entire people, at almost every level of society and across the political and religious spectrum, seem to have concluded they have nothing to hope for and nothing to lose — that all their dreams will remain deferred for the foreseeable future — an explosion may be inevitable.